

Nielsen to expand its TV sample

The metrics firm hopes to triple it to 100,000 viewers by 2011 for more precise ratings.

By Meg James; Los Angeles Times; September 27, 2007; p. C2

In a nod to the rapidly changing entertainment landscape, Nielsen Media Research said Wednesday that it would triple the size of its TV ratings sample audience by 2011 to provide more accurate measurement.

"Audience fragmentation continues to increase," said Sara Erichson, a Nielsen executive vice president for client services. "This is an acknowledgment that people watch television in different ways, and this is where television is headed."

For years, Nielsen equipped 5,000 homes around the country with its "people meter" devices to compile Nielsen's national ratings, which are used to help determine the price of TV advertising. Although that panel size provided good estimates for the size of audiences for the big broadcast networks, determining viewership for small cable channels was problematic.

What's more, TV executives have long been frustrated that Nielsen does not factor "out-of-home" viewing in its estimates. That means that if people-meter participants watch a TV program or a ballgame at a restaurant or a friend's house, they are not counted. These days, people also are downloading shows onto portable devices such as iPods, exacerbating Nielsen's challenge.

Nielsen slowly began adding more homes to the audience panel five years ago. It currently has wired with people meters about 12,000 homes, which include about 35,000 people. Within four years, Nielsen hopes its sample audience will be made up of 37,000 homes with about 100,000 people.

The expansion is necessary as audiences continue to scatter.

In addition, people are watching television programs differently from how they did a few years ago. Nielsen estimates that nearly 20% of the homes with TVs in the U.S. now are equipped with digital video recorders, which allow people to watch TV shows at their convenience.

"Granted, people are watching more traditional television than ever before, but there are more TV channels and they are often time-shifting their viewing," Erichson said.

Nielsen's clients -- the TV networks, cable channels and advertising agencies -- are increasingly demanding that Nielsen come up with more precise ways to estimate audiences for various forms of entertainment.

Among its enhancements, Nielsen plans to work with another firm to begin measuring out-of-home viewing next year.

"Increasing the size of the sample audience is really important to measure the audience with the precision that our clients want and need," Erichson said.

The industry also wants Nielsen to track the various media preferences of the sample audience to determine how individuals spend their time.

Nielsen Media Research*

Sampling

Nielsen TV families are a cross-section of households from all over the United States. We carefully draw our samples in a way that offers every American household with a television an equal chance of being selected.

Sample design, selection, and maintenance for both the national and local market samples are the responsibility of highly-skilled statisticians — Nielsen's guardians of sample quality. They stay abreast of new sampling methods developed by survey organizations, the U.S. Census Bureau, and other government agencies.

Our samples include homes from all 50 states, from cities to towns, from suburbs to rural areas. We have homeowners and apartment dwellers — some with children and some without — across a broad range of demographic categories. We include people of all ages, income groups, geographic areas, ethnicities and educational levels — all in proportion to their presence in the population at large. Once homes are selected and agree to participate, we take great care to protect their identity and privacy, and no data about individuals or specific households are ever disclosed.

Can families volunteer to become a Nielsen home? While we'd like to accept volunteers in our panels, we are unable to do so. To include volunteers would violate basic laws of random sampling practice and skew our results. A truly representative sample of the population can only be generated using statistical methods of selection.

Selecting Households

Selecting a representative sample of homes is vital to collecting data that mirrors the population's viewing habits. We select households through one of two different methods: geographic selection (area probability sampling) in the national sample and larger markets, and randomly-generated telephone numbers (Total Telephone Frame) in smaller markets.

For area probability sampling, Nielsen's statistical research department begins with broad, U.S. Census-defined geographic areas. We dispatch field representatives to identify each and every housing unit in these areas, regardless of size or accessibility. Ultimately, we narrow the selection down to individual, randomly-selected housing units. Using this method, all households have an equal probability of selection into the sample. This allows for complete coverage of the country, since no homes are excluded by design.

For Total Telephone Frame sampling, Nielsen's statistical research department uses random digit-dialing to generate a call list that includes both published and unpublished telephone numbers in a Designated Market Area (DMA). Rather than using recordings, our Call Center staffs in Florida and Kentucky personally make multiple attempts to reach households, ensuring that they have a chance to be included in the sample.

* This information is from NielsenMedia.com